

Carlos A. Romero-Barceló

1932–

RESIDENT COMMISSIONER 1993–2001
NEW PROGRESSIVE FROM PUERTO RICO

With only a few breaks, Carlos Antonio Romero-Barceló served in public office for nearly 40 years. A leading figure in the Partido Nuevo Progresista (New Progressive Party, or PNP), Romero-Barceló served two terms as Resident Commissioner in the U.S. House of Representatives, promoting Puerto Rico's statehood and working to strengthen the island's relationship with the federal government.

Romero-Barceló, who became the most distinguished member of a prominent political family, was born September 4, 1932, in San Juan, Puerto Rico. His maternal grandfather, Antonio R. Barceló, was president of the insular senate, and his mother, Josefina Barceló, was the last president of the island's Partido Liberal (Liberal Party) before it dissolved. As a young man, Romero-Barceló moved to New Hampshire to attend Phillips Exeter Academy, from which he graduated in 1949. He earned a B.A. from Yale University in 1953, with a double major in political science and economics. Returning to Puerto Rico, he earned a law degree from the Universidad de Puerto Rico in 1956, passed the bar, and began working for a private law firm. He married and had two sons, Carlitos and Andres. Romero-Barceló and his second wife, Kate Donnelly, also had a son, Juan Carlos.¹

Romero-Barceló started his political career as the director of the pro-statehood group Citizens for State 51. From 1965 to 1967, he worked his way up to the PNP leadership. Only 36 years old, but increasingly popular, he ran for mayor of San Juan in 1968 against elder statesman Jorge Font Saldaña of the Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Party, or PPD). According to a city newspaper, the election quickly became “a battle between the generations at a time in which age probably has a bigger role to play in an island election than at any time in its history.”² An enthralling speaker,

Romero-Barceló visited San Juan's housing projects and schools as he talked about his ambitious economic program, “Operation Rescue.”³ In “the most interesting, stimulating, and, at times, gaudiest campaign the city has had in recent history,” Romero-Barceló, who stumped with armed security personnel, crushed Font Saldaña in the general election.⁴

As mayor, Romero-Barceló modernized the city's waste disposal services, and he worked to combat drug addiction and poor housing in San Juan.⁵ He advocated for a stronger tourism bureau and remade the mayor's office, transforming it from what one newspaper called “a political outpost.” Romero-Barceló's combined initiatives made him widely popular, and he was re-elected in 1972 by a comfortable margin.⁶

Romero-Barceló's tenure as mayor made him a household name, and in 1976 the PNP picked him as its gubernatorial candidate. His opponent was incumbent Rafael Hernández Colón of the PPD, who earlier had instituted a handful of controversial financial reforms. Romero-Barceló emphasized his plan to create jobs and downplayed the PNP's position on Puerto Rico's status. That fall he rode a wave of anti-incumbent frustration to a convincing victory in the general election.⁷

By the late 1970s, Romero-Barceló had become the consummate politician. “His personality fills the room. He's 100 percent political,” admitted one member of the press. And he acted the part, too. “The brawny governor, who looks like a silver-haired movie idol,” said the *Washington Post*, seemed to captivate an audience the way few others in Puerto Rico could.⁸

The new governor inherited an economy in utter ruin. Even with an annual allowance from the federal government of more than one billion dollars, Puerto Rico was still twice as impoverished as the poorest U.S.



state.⁹ There were no immediate solutions to the island's unemployment problem, but Romero-Barceló began putting together a long-term agenda so that Puerto Rico could "become more self-sufficient." The plan included education and vocational training for the rapidly growing population.¹⁰ Romero-Barceló emphasized growing more and different foodstuffs for domestic markets, and as part of his push to win greater borrowing privileges from Washington, he worked to curtail generous tax exemptions for many of the island's businesses.¹¹

Romero-Barceló also made statehood a pillar of his administration. The governor had long viewed the island's commonwealth status as a deliberately nebulous concept that was little more than an outdated "interim compromise."¹² Statehood, he believed, would finally generate some stability. It would end Puerto Rico's "political inferiority," he said, and open doors to all sorts of federal programs.¹³ However, no amount of lobbying could withstand the pressure of another recession and a new oppositional majority in the island's legislature.¹⁴ Though Romero-Barceló won re-election in 1980 by a razor-thin 0.2 percent, he was never able to muster the popular support that was needed for a referendum on statehood.¹⁵ Four years later he was ousted from the governor's mansion by his longtime rival, Hernández Colón of the PPD.¹⁶

After the election Romero-Barceló returned to private law practice, but he was not away from politics for long.¹⁷ He was elected to the Puerto Rican senate and served from 1986 to 1989, having lost the gubernatorial primary election in 1987 to San Juan mayor and future Resident Commissioner Baltasar Corrada-del Río. After his senate term, a brief hiatus from public office helped him regain control of the party, and he was re-elected PNP president from 1989 to 1992 (he had served earlier from 1974 to 1985).¹⁸

In 1992 Romero-Barceló became the New Progressives' candidate to challenge Antonio J. Colorado, the incumbent Resident Commissioner in the U.S. House of Representatives. After fighting a smear campaign by the insular legislature, Romero-Barceló began positioning himself more as a populist than as a party stalwart: "As resident commissioner," he said, "I would not be

representing the government of Puerto Rico. I would be representing the people of Puerto Rico."¹⁹ Opponents criticized his rather gruff political style, but the former governor was a seasoned fundraiser.²⁰ He sought to reform the island's tax code and promised to bolster Medicare and Medicaid, establish a minimum wage, and secure Pell grants for the island's schools. On Election Day, Romero-Barceló captured 48.5 percent of the vote, besting Colorado by less than 1 percent.²¹ In 1993, when Romero-Barceló took his seat in the U.S. House, he became the first former Puerto Rican governor to serve as Resident Commissioner.

Though the federal-insular relationship was downplayed during the election, securing statehood for Puerto Rico moved to the top of Romero-Barceló's agenda after he arrived in Washington. He framed the island's political status, and his own unique position in the House, as part of a larger civil rights narrative, caucusing with the Democratic Party because he had "no doubt that it is easier to work with Democrats than Republicans on civil rights."²² In addition to the constitutional limits placed on the Resident Commissioner's ability to vote, another part of the problem, especially as Romero-Barceló saw it, had to do with taxes. Since the territories and the commonwealth of Puerto Rico paid no federal income taxes, their representatives in the House—the Territorial Delegates and the Resident Commissioner—had been denied the right to vote on pending legislation, preventing them from raising taxes, which their constituents did not pay. Romero-Barceló found the pay-to-play mentality unfair, noting that he had "never heard of such a thing as no representation without taxation." The final version of the House Rules adopted in 1993 gave Romero-Barceló and the other Delegates a vote in the Committee of the Whole as long as they did not determine the outcome of any particular measure. While Romero-Barceló appreciated the modest amount of leverage he had acquired, he said it was "not really a vote, just an opportunity to participate."²³

In his first four-year term, Romero-Barceló was placed on the Committee on Natural Resources and the Committee on Education and Labor, where he focused most of his legislative energy on improving Puerto Rico's

school system.²⁴ He sat on multiple conference committees but struggled to increase funding for the island. In early March 1994, as the House debated the specifics of the Improving America's Schools Act (H.R. 6), Romero-Barceló introduced an amendment to lift the cap on the island's funding. Federal policy, he said, had created a "second-class, underfunded educational system" in Puerto Rico, but though Romero-Barceló won support from more-progressive House Members, his amendment was voted down, 358 to 70.²⁵ The next day a similar amendment failed to pass by a similar margin.²⁶ For years, Romero-Barceló had also wanted to replace the island's corporate tax breaks with wage-based credits, but he opposed the Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996 because it promised to upend Puerto Rico's revenue program.²⁷

Though Romero-Barceló's legislative record was modest during his first few years in the House, he often pursued policy that was outside Puerto Rico's immediate interests. An active member of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC), Romero-Barceló was elected vice chairman at the start the 104th Congress (1995–1997). At a time when Hispanic voters were growing increasingly powerful—every Hispanic Member who ran for re-election in 1994 had won—Romero-Barceló and the CHC worked to shape national policy.²⁸ He readily backed William J. (Bill) Clinton's presidency, hoping his plans to stimulate the economy and reform health care would improve living conditions in the poorest areas of the United States.²⁹ He pushed to limit occupational hazards, spoke passionately about protecting Medicare benefits, and argued to raise the minimum wage.³⁰ In spring 1996, Romero-Barceló attacked the English Language Empowerment Act of 1996 (H.R. 123), which would have required all federal documents to be printed only in English. He called the measure "absurd" and questioned its constitutionality. House Rules prevented him from voting against it, however, and the bill passed but died in the Senate Judiciary Committee.³¹

Romero-Barceló won re-election in 1996 with 50 percent of the vote and returned to Washington on the eve of the 100th anniversary of America's sovereignty

over Puerto Rico.³² The timing intensified the federal government's effort to permanently define America's insular policy, and in late February 1997, the 105th Congress began considering the United States-Puerto Rico Political Status Act (H.R. 856).³³ Co-sponsored by Romero-Barceló, the bill would "provide the first Congressionally-sponsored process leading to full self-government for Puerto Rico," a later committee report argued.³⁴ Months of horse trading in Congress and heated discussions in Puerto Rico preceded a contentious debate on the House Floor that lasted nearly 12 hours. Romero-Barceló helped manage the bill, which passed the House 209 to 208, but died in the Senate. "What is regrettable in the saga of Puerto Rico's century-old colonial relationship with the United States is not the recent one-vote majority in the House to permit Puerto Rico to begin a process of self-determination," Romero-Barceló said, "but rather Congress's long history of indifference to and inaction on the political status of Puerto Rico."³⁵

Romero-Barceló continued to sit on the Education and Resources Committees in the 105th and 106th Congresses (1997–2001) and became the Ranking Minority Member of Resources' Subcommittee on National Parks and National Lands. In addition to statehood, Romero-Barceló devoted his attention to health policy, resource conservation, and education. His bill to remove the caps on funding for veterans' Medicaid programs in Puerto Rico faltered from the start, and he found "it unconscionable that the Federal Government would uphold a policy where the health and lives of the people of Puerto Rico are considered to be of less value than the lives of other citizens."³⁶ Neither of his bills to conserve and protect Puerto Rico's sensitive ecosystems passed committee review. Romero-Barceló adamantly opposed the English Language Fluency Act, which required non-native speakers of English to master the language in just two years. The bill, he said, amounted to outright discrimination and threatened to overturn nearly 30 years of more progressive policy.³⁷

At the end of his House career, Romero-Barceló was still fighting the same battles he had fought at the start. "Puerto Ricans are first-class citizens in times of war,"

he said, observing that the island's residents had fought and died in U.S. conflicts, but "second-class citizens in times of peace."³⁸ He called the island's unequal privileges with regard to federal health programs an "abomination," questioning how America could "stand as a model for the world when it maintains a policy of discrimination, a policy of economic and political apartheid."³⁹ When the U.S. Navy accidentally killed a Puerto Rican civilian during a training mission on the island of Vieques, debates about the island's self-governance began anew. Romero-Barceló supported moving naval operations elsewhere, calling the Vieques question "a defining moment in Puerto Rico's relationship" with the federal government.⁴⁰ Despite a tenuous agreement with the Clinton administration that would allow the U.S. Navy to continue using the island, Puerto Rico's new pro-commonwealth administration began calling for the navy to leave.⁴¹

Romero-Barceló was one of the many New Progressives who were swept out of office in 2000; he lost the election to Aníbal Acevedo-Vilá of the PPD by about 4 percent.⁴² Though Romero-Barceló received endorsements from President Clinton and a handful of sitting Members and raised significantly more money than his opponent, accusations of corruption against the PNP's entire roster cost him the race. "Theirs was a campaign of insults and defamation," he said of the PPD before vowing to support the New Progressive agenda in the coming years. "We are going to fight to bring statehood to the island because we want equality."⁴³ After the election, he returned home to Puerto Rico, becoming president of the Puerto Rican delegation to the League of United Latin American Citizens.⁴⁴ In 2003 he was passed over for the New Progressive nomination to his former post as Resident Commissioner, but he remained active in the party's leadership.⁴⁵

FOR FURTHER READING

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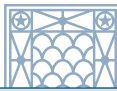
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NOTES

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- 2 Manny Suarez, "Font v. Romero," 17 August 1968, *San Juan Star*: 21.
- 3 Manny Suarez, "Candidates for Mayor Debate on TV," 11 October 1968, *San Juan Star*: 1; Martha Dreyer, "Romero: Plan Board OK'd Bridge," 18 October 1968, *San Juan Star*: 24; James McDonough, "Romero Shows Appeal to Youth," 21 October 1968, *San Juan Star*: 3.
- 4 "Fraud' Smelled by Romero as He Slams Election Board"; "The Choice for Mayor," 4 November 1968, *San Juan Star*: 43. See also "San Juan," 6 November 1968, *San Juan Star*: 23; Frank Ramos, "Win Margin Surprises Romero," 7 November 1968, *San Juan Star*: 3.
- 5 Dimas Planas, "Mayor-Elect Unveils Part of City Cabinet," 31 December 1968, *San Juan Star*: 3; Pedro Roman, "Romero to Wage War against Drugs," 20 December 1968, *San Juan Star*: 10; Frank Ramos, "Romero Urges P.R. Culture Center," 11 December 1971, *San Juan Star*: 6; Margarita Babb, "Romero Slates New Poverty Program," 15 October 1972, *San Juan Star*: 3; "72 Campaign: Mayors of San Juan," 5 November 1972, *San Juan Star*: S-4.
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- 7 "Romero has become a political figure at an island-wide level," observed a newspaper even before he won election in 1968. See Dimas Planas, "Romero's Future," 31 October 1968, *San Juan Star*: 41. See also David Vidal, "Change in Puerto Rico Vowed," 4 November 1976, *New York Times*: 22; "Statehood Advocates Sweep Puerto Rico," 4 November 1976, *Washington Post*: A11; John Van Hyning, "Confronting an Island's Ills," 2 January 1977, *Washington Post*: 3; Charles A. Krause, "New Governor of P.R. Ignores Statehood Issue," 3 January 1977, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 8 Joanne Omang, "Puerto Rico in Political Turmoil," 20 August 1978, *Washington Post*: C1.
- 9 Andrew Jaffe, "Puerto Rico: Vote for Change," 22 November 1976, *Newsweek*: 46; "Puerto Rico: Getting Things Taped," 4 December

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- 10 Interview with Carlos Romero-Barceló, Governor of Puerto Rico, "Should Puerto Rico Be a State?" 11 April 1977, *U.S. News & World Report*: 47.
- 11 Charles A. Krause, "Romero Says P.R. Should Control Offshore Minerals," 22 January 1977, *Washington Post*: A10; Interview with Carlos Romero-Barceló, Governor of Puerto Rico, "Should Puerto Rico Be a State?"; William C. Bryant, "Puerto Rico Loses Some of Its Business Allure," 10 July 1978, *U.S. News & World Report*: 55; "New Look for Puerto Rico," 10 March 1979, *Economist*: 116.
- 12 Carlos Romero-Barceló, "Puerto Rico, U.S.A.: The Case for Statehood," *Foreign Affairs* 59 (Fall 1980): 61.
- 13 Omang, "Puerto Rico in Political Turmoil." For background on Romero-Barceló's position on Puerto Rican statehood, see César J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History since 1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007): 277. See also Romero-Barceló, "Puerto Rico, U.S.A.: The Case for Statehood": 60–81 (quotation on p. 62); and Interview with Carlos Romero-Barceló, Governor of Puerto Rico, "Should Puerto Rico Be a State?"
- 14 Warren Brown, "Puerto Rico Bill Lagging," 4 January 1977, *Washington Post*: A1; "Ford Asks for Referendum on Puerto Rico Statehood Plan," 15 January 1977, *Washington Post*: B3; Charles Krause, "Showdown Viewed as Certain in Puerto Rico's Ties to U.S.," 11 January 1977, *Washington Post*: A15; "Puerto Rico: Stalled," 17 January 1981, *Economist*: 31; "Puerto Rican Leader Re-Elected," 11 November 1980, *Chicago Tribune*: 10; Alfonso Chardy, "Puerto Rico: The Soul Is Latin," 11 September 1982, *Miami Herald*: A10.
- 15 Romero-Barceló won by only 3,503 of the roughly 1.6 million votes cast in 1980. See "Governor Is Sworn In," 3 January 1981, *Washington Post*: A4. See also Joanne Omang, "Puerto Rico Unable to Find Way to Escape Commonwealth Status," 3 August 1982, *Washington Post*: A2.
- 16 Sonia L. Nazario, "Candidate on Horseback," 14 September 1984, *Wall Street Journal*: 62; Harold Lidin, "Ex-Puerto Rican Governor Regains Post," 8 November 1984, *Miami Herald*: A25. See also Joan O'Neill, "Puerto Rico's Governor's Race Reflects Pro-State, Commonwealth Tensions," 11 November 1984, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 17 Mireya Navarro, "Puerto Rico Gripped by Its Watergate," 30 January 1992, *New York Times*: A18.
- 18 The 1987 race had the island's first-ever gubernatorial primary election. See Manuel Suarez, "Ex-Governor's Bid Complicates Puerto Rico Race," 8 November 1987, *New York Times*: 41. See also *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, "Carlos Antonio Romero-Barceló," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.
- 19 The tax legislation had been introduced by Rep. Dan Rostenkowski of Illinois and sought to recoup the estimated \$2.5 billion the island lost every five years because of the loopholes in section 936. Regarding the office of Resident Commissioner, Romero-Barceló argued, "During the years of Popular Democratic Party power, the resident commissioner has been a tool of the party, a puppet. The governor pulled the strings and the resident commissioner spoke." See Robert Friedman, "CRB Says He Will Back Cutting 936," 6 August 1992, *San Juan Star*: 3.
- 20 Robert Friedman, "Colorado, Romero Face Off, But Throw No Body Punches," 14 August 1992, *San Juan Star*: 2; Maria Bird Pico, "Romero Leads Colorado in Campaign Fund-Raising," 22 October 1992, *San Juan Star*: 17.
- 21 Robert Friedman, "Romero Appears to Have Won Race," 5 November 1992, *San Juan Star*: 3; "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>; Robert Friedman, "Romero Links 936 Changes to Funding for P.R. Programs," 6 December 1992, *San Juan Star*: 4; Jenifer McKim, "New Commissioner Vows to Fight Law Barring Pell Grants," 18 December 1992, *San Juan Star*: 2.
- 22 Friedman, "Romero Appears to Have Won Race"; Friedman, "Romero Links 936 Changes to Funding for P.R. Programs."
- 23 Robert Friedman, "P.R. Commissioner Speaks His Piece on the House Floor," 6 January 1993, *San Juan Star*: 3; Robert Friedman, "CBR Gets Diluted Right to Vote," 6 January 1993, *San Juan Star*: 3; Robert Friedman, "Romero Co-Sponsors Bill to Permit Family Leave," 7 January 1993, *San Juan Star*: 4.
- 24 During the 104th Congress (1995–1997), the Committee on Education and Labor was renamed the Committee on Economic and Educational Opportunities. It was renamed the Committee on Education and the Workforce in 1997, and remained so until 2007 when Democrats regained the majority and the panel was renamed Education and Labor. The Committee on Natural Resources was renamed the Committee on Resources from the 104th Congress through the 111th Congress.
- 25 *Congressional Record*, House, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (2 March 1994): 3669–3670.
- 26 *Congressional Record*, House, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (3 March 1994): 3800–3801.
- 27 The legislation, he said, also offered "no increase in the Federal benefits provided to the U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico." See, *Congressional Record*, House, 104th Cong., 2nd sess. (21 May 1996): 11989. Dan Burton and Peter Deutsch, "It's Time to Reform the Puerto Rico Tax Credit," 16 January 1996, *Christian Science Monitor*: 18; Doreen A. Hemlock, "Puerto Rico Loses Its Edge," 21 September 1996, *New York Times*: Business Day, 31.
- 28 Ana Gershanik, "Caucus Takes Stock of Its Successes," 15 December 1994, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans): G6.
- 29 *Congressional Record*, House, 103rd Cong., 1st sess. (18 February 1993): 2973; *Congressional Record*, House, 103rd Cong., 1st sess. (29 July 1993): 17702; *Congressional Record*, House, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (2 February 1994): 745–746; *Congressional Record*,



- House, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (29 June 1994): 15092.
- 30 *Congressional Record*, House, 104th Cong., 1st sess. (1 August 1995): 21332; *Congressional Record*, House, 104th Cong., 1st sess. (11 May 1995): 12645; *Congressional Record*, House, 104th Cong., 1st sess. (26 July 1995): 20518; *Congressional Record*, House, 104th Cong., 2nd sess. (23 April 1996): 8560–8561.
- 31 *Congressional Record*, House, 104th Cong., 2nd sess. (1 August 1996): 21175, quotation on p. 21198.
- 32 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 33 Stephen S. Rosenfeld, “Forgotten Isles of Empire,” 24 January 1997, *Washington Post*: A23.
- 34 House Committee on Resources, *United States-Puerto Rico Political Status Act*, 105th Cong., 1st sess., 1997, H. Rep. 131, 30.
- 35 Carlos Romero-Barceló, “Puerto Rico: Still Only a Colony,” 3 April 1998, *Washington Post*: A30. For the debate, which lasted nearly 12 hours, see *Congressional Record*, House, 105th Cong., 2nd sess. (4 March 1998): 2484–2551. Many islanders complained that the bill’s language would have precluded the appearance of the island’s commonwealth status on the ballot. For a brief explanation, see Ayala and Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century*: 293–294.
- 36 *Congressional Record*, House, 105th Cong., 1st sess. (25 June 1997): 12255; *Congressional Record*, House, 106th Cong., 1st sess. (23 June 1999): 14062.
- 37 Romero-Barceló’s conservation bills were H.R. 4668, introduced on June 14, 2000, and H.R. 5651, introduced on December 8, 2000. For the English Language Fluency Act, see *Congressional Record*, House, 105th Cong., 2nd sess. (10 September 1998): 19952.
- 38 *Congressional Record*, House, 106th Cong., 1st sess. (13 April 1999): 6270.
- 39 *Congressional Record*, House, 106th Cong., 1st sess. (23 February 1999): 2688.
- 40 Juan O. Tamayo, “Island’s Naval Battle Escalates, Puerto Rico Resists U.S. Firing Range,” 30 August 1999, *Miami Herald*: A1.
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- 43 Carlos Antonio Otero, “Romero Says Clinton, 5 Members of Congress Endorse His Candidacy,” 31 October 2000, *San Juan Star*: 6; Maria Soledad Calero and Carlos Antonio Otero, “Acevedo Vilá Defeats Incumbent CRB for Resident Commissioner,” 8 November 2000, *San Juan Star*: 7. Quotation from Laura Albertelli, “Pesquera to Go Back to Private Life,” 8 November 2000, *San Juan Star*: 6.
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- 45 “Puerto Rico Hopefuls Start Bids for Office,” 2 August 2003, *Orlando Sentinel*: A14.



“I AM CONVINCED, BOTH
AS A LATIN AMERICAN AND
AS A U.S. CITIZEN, THAT
STATEHOOD FOR PUERTO RICO
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Carlos A. Romero-Barceló
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